

PHILADELPHIA CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY

a life more beautiful

PREVIEW
NOTES

The Tallis Scholars
Thursday, December 5 – 7:30 PM
Church of the Holy Trinity

PROGRAM

Program of works by Poulenc, Byrd, Messiaen, Allegri, and Tallis

According to legend, the melodies of the traditional chants of the church were dictated to Pope Gregory I by the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove—a moment depicted in countless works of art in the Middle Ages. *Salve regina* is one of the most enduring of these melodies, and is still sung as an antiphon after various Offices of the Catholic Church. Immediately recognisable, in its solemn form, by its four-note opening motif, it was frequently used as the basis for polyphonic compositions by medieval and renaissance musicians.

The *Ave Maria* is one of the defining prayers of the Catholic Church, borrowing from the Angel Gabriel's salutation to Mary announcing the good news: Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. William Cornysh's *Ave Maria* is in fact based neither on the chant nor the prayer, instead using the familiar opening two words to introduce a bespoke devotion, addressing the Blessed Virgin Mary as, in turn, queen of the heavens, mistress of the world, and empress of hell. Both the *Ave Maria* and *Salve regina* feature in key scenes of Poulenc's 1957 opera *Dialogues des Carmélites*, which is set in a late eighteenth-century Carmelite nunnery. The latter is sung by the nuns as they are to be executed one by one by Revolutionary forces. The *Ave Maria* comes from the middle of the opera, sung by the nuns together, and shares much of its structure and tonal language with the composer's choral music. Here it is presented in an arrangement for unaccompanied voices.

One often wonders what Gregorio Allegri would think of the strange and special legacy of his *Miserere*. A fairly straightforward, penitential setting of a supplicatory psalm, he wrote it as a *falsobordone*—that is, a piece in which text is

recited on a chord before a concluding formula—and based it on the ancient *tonus peregrinus*. One imagines it would have caused him no moderate amount of shock to learn that his work, transmuted through a centuries-long process of embellishment and alteration by generations of musicians, would one day lay claim to being the most famous piece of choral music in the world. Those embellishments go some way towards explaining this—that famous high C, which derives from the ornamentation with which the skilled singers of the Papal Choir of the Sistine Chapel would regularly elaborate on written music.

Much of the most profound sacred choral music arises from the contemplation of the Eucharist—the miracle of the bread and wine turned flesh and blood. *O sacrum convivium* explores this mystical phenomenon, and both Tallis and Messiaen, though centuries apart, clearly find it somewhat intoxicating. Tallis' ritualistic polyphony rises and falls, frequently including the exquisite pain of false relations—cadences where two parts clash against one another before the resolution. Messiaen's harmonies are piquant, too, the chords and dark sonority swirling about like incense. Throughout, there is an ecstatic quality, never more so than in the *Alleluia*, which is not forthright but quietly radiant and intense.

The *Magnificat*, Mary's hymn of praise on receiving the news that she is to bear the Christ, is not merely a text for the Christmas season, but one used daily in Christian liturgy as evidence of God's word made manifest. In the nascent Anglican liturgy of 16th-century England, the 'Short Service' form evolved as a way to deliver this text in the vernacular, and in such a way that the words could be clearly understood. Ever alive to the rhythms of the text, Byrd's setting performs this function admirably, moving flexibly between four and five voices. At the same time on the continent, the *Magnificat* was still firmly entrenched in the service of Vespers, and sung in Latin polyphony.